



TITLE:

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CITATION:

Kobayashi, Shozo. SENTENCE STRESS AND PROSE RHYTHM. 英文学評論 1956, 3: 1-14

ISSUE DATE:

1956-03

URL:

https://doi.org/10.14989/RevEL_3_1

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SENTENCE STRESS AND PROSE RHYTHM

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I. Introduction

English has been taught and studied in Japan seventy, eighty, ninety years or more. One may be tempted to ask if there has been much improvement in the methods of teaching it. To the great disappointment to all, the answer is in the negative. The following quotation, used by John S. Kenyon, in "AMERICAN PRONUNCIATION," will explain this sad state of affairs: "A teacher of speech untrained in phonetics is as useless as a doctor untrained in anatomy." (George Sampson)

One of the elementary lessons in English is to teach the importance of sentence-stress or sense-stress. Even in Japan every pupil learns word-stress, but nothing has been learned about the more important sentence-stress.

If a teacher asks university students to put stress-marks on the following sentences, they will probably say they cannot. They will

even infer that it is silly of the teacher to ask such a thing, because each sentence consists of monosyllabic words only, which are not stressed in any dictionary. Is that really so?

I put a book on the desk.

He ran as fast as he could.

Look at the dog he found there.

One will find, however, that put, book and desk in the first sentence, and ran, fast and could in the second, and Look, dog and found in the third, are all stressed when one listens to an Englishman or an American reading or saying them.

Here is something very interesting to know: even in Japanese schools, where no attention has been paid to sentence-stress, teachers do explain how monosyllabic words in poetry are to be stressed, though they do not in matters of prose.

Accordingly, every student of English knows that the following words, tolls, knell and day in Gray's world-famous poem are all stressed:

× ' × ' × ' × ' × '
The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.

One may wonder why the stress of monosyllabic words in poetry is taught when it is not in prose, but no one seems to be able to find the solution.

One must learn not only word-stress but sentence-stress, which puts life and rhythm into an English composition; without it English may sound quite dead.

Sentence-stress must be recognized in English, whether in prose or in verse. Its origin was in prose, and consequently it appeared in verse; yet it must be noted that it does not exist in prose in the same way that it does in verse.

Let me here quote what two authorities on English phonetics—Prof. Jones and Prof. Kenyon—give as a definition of the term.

II. Definitions of Sentence Stress by Jones and Kenyon

(1) Sentence Stress: General Principle.

“The relative stress of the words in a group depends on their

relative importance. The more important a word is, the stronger is its stress. The most important words are usually the nouns, adjectives, demonstrative and interrogative pronouns, principal verbs, and adverbs. Such words are therefore stressed as a general rule (subject to exceptions). Thus the first sentence of this paragraph is stressed as follows :

ˈrelatɪv ˈstres əv ðə ˈwə:dz ɪn ə ˈgru:p dɪˈpendz ɔn ðə ˈrelatɪv
ɪmˈpɔ:təns.

Similarly What do you think of the weather? is usually stressed thus :

ˈwɒt dju: ˈθɪŋk əv ðə ˈweðə;

this train generally arrives late is normally stressed as follows :

ˈðɪs ˈtreɪn ˈdʒenrəli əˈraɪvz ˈleɪt.

When all the important words in a sentence are equally important they all have strong stress. In this way it frequently happens that a number of strong syllables occur consecutively. Thus in the sentence John has just bought two large brown dogs every word would be stressed except has, thus :

ˈdʒɒn əz ˈdʒʌst ˈbɔ:t ˈtu: ˈlɑ:dʒ ˈbraʊn ˈdɒgz."

Jones : AN OUTLINE OF ENGLISH PHONETICS p. 242

(2) "The stressings of words in the sentence vary according to the emphasis one wishes to give to particular words. There are nearly always some words in a sentence which are of greater importance than others. Some words can be slurred over; some are of such small importance that people leave them out altogether in telegrams. (All words are 'important' which give the hearer a new piece of information, and which therefore in a sense are in a kind of contrast.)"

Jones : THE PRONUNCIATION OF ENGLISH p. 141

(3) "The term sense-stress applies to the prominence given to a word over the preceding or following word in a group that makes sense. Thus in I will do it now, ai, du :, and nau receive higher stress than wil and it.

"Hence monosyllabic words, which by themselves have no accent, when joined in sense-groups—phrases, clauses, or sentences—take

varying degree of sense-stress, or none, according to the meaning expressed. When plurisyllables are so joined in sense groups, they take sense-stress only on the syllables that would be accented if the words stood by themselves, so that accent and sense-stress coincide.

“Thus in the sentence His father promised to reflect over it, each of the words father, promised, reflect, and over takes a sense-stress on its accented syllable, that on reflect being the strongest, those on father and promised being next, and that on over being weaker.”

Kenyon: AMERICAN PRONUNCIATION p. 81

(4) “The underlying principle of sense-stress is the fact that words are more prominent or less prominent according to the nature of the ideas they express. In general it is true that words which present to the mind a definite picture or idea, such as tree, run, slow, wagon, walking, swiftly, have relatively strong sense-stress, and words that represent vague ideas or mere relations, such as the prepositions in, for, etc., or conjunctions, as and, but, etc., or auxiliaries, as can, has, shall, etc., have relatively weak sense-stress.

“It would be difficult to formulate all the laws of sense-stress in English, and only a few illustrative examples will be given.”

The ‘trees are ‘maples.

The ‘trees are ‘tall.

The ‘trip was in ‘vain.

The ‘man was a‘way.

The ‘farmer dis‘posed of his ‘holdings.

The ‘man has ‘gone to his ‘house.

(5) “Sense-stress is the foundation of English poetry—not only of “accent” or “meter” but of the essence of poetry. Poetry is speech—a fact sometimes forgotten. The sense-stresses of speech determine the movements and contrasts of speech—the movements and contrasts of the thought and feeling. The poet selects and arranges those thoughts and feelings whose stress movements and contrasts make up the particular pattern of verse he has chosen. Thus the rhythm and the thought and feeling are one. The stress movements and contrasts are present, not because it is verse, but because it is speech. It is verse

because the speech stresses are what they are. The verse-beats are simply the beats of the thought and feeling—the sense-stresses. There is exactly the same variety in the strength of the successive stresses of poetry that there is in the sense-stresses of living speech. Those systems of marking verse scansion that mark the verse-beats all alike obscure that fact and mislead the student. The same general statements apply to “free verse.” If it has any rhythm, it is the rhythm of speech and is based on sense-stress.”

Kenyon p. 94

III. Examples and Comments

The following stories are quoted from Prof. Jones’s ‘Phonetic Readings in English,’ to illustrate sense-stress :

THE TRAVELLER AND HIS DOG.

A traveller was just going to start on a journey, when he saw his dog standing at the door, and stretching himself. “Come along, you lazy dog,” he said; “what are you waiting here for?” The dog wagged his tail, and said, “I was only waiting for you, master.”

(Lesson 2)

No wonder that such words as traveller, journey, standing, stretching, along, lazy, waiting, only, and master have stress: they are words of two or three syllables. But it must be observed that such monosyllabic words as just, start, saw, dog, door, come, etc. are stressed, too. Why? Because they are important words in the sentences.

Particular attention should be paid to the word ‘going’ which is not stressed, though it is dissyllabic. It can be easily understood if it is compared with ‘going’ in the following story, quoted from the same book.

CAUGHT.

A beggar who had tried many ways for increasing his finances, at last hit on the plan of pretending to be dumb. A gentleman who was passing by knew the beggar by sight, and going up to him, suddenly asked, "How long have you been dumb?" The beggar was taken unawares, and quite forgot about his decision not to speak, and answered quickly, "Ever since I was a baby." (Lesson 5)

In the first story, 'going' means 'about,' while in the second, it means 'actually moving to a certain point.'

It is also interesting to compare two 'by's' in the second story: "A gentleman who was passing by knew the beggar by sight."

It is clear that the first 'by' is an adverb, and the second a preposition, which is very often weakly stressed, because it is not important in normal or unemphatic sentences.

Compare the following:

I'll eat a piece of blotting-paper to counteract it. (Lesson 9)

Then your mother shall have the first, I'll eat the second, and you can have the third. (Lesson 17)

In the first sentence, 'I' is unstressed and 'eat' is stressed—that is the case with normal or unemphatic sentences.

In the second sentence, 'I' is stressed and 'eat' is not. Why? It is very simple to explain. The speaker wants to make the word 'I,' a pronoun, very prominent, and naturally he stresses the word, and as a result 'eat,' a verb, has no stress, although in ordinary unemphatic sentences verbs are stressed and personal pronouns are not.

And “you can can have the third” is to be noticed, too, because ‘you’ is stressed.

A sentence in Lesson 3 is stressed in the following way :

“Then what is the smallest quantity you can cut?” inquired the doctor.

‘Can,’ an auxiliary verb, is stressed, while the verb ‘cut’ is not.

In ordinary, unemphatic sentences, verbs are stressed, but less important auxiliary verbs are not. Thus : I can cut. He can go.

It is interesting to find ‘inquired,’ a trisyllabic word, is not stressed. Prof. Jones says in his “OUTLINE OF ENGLISH PHONETICS” that ‘In phrases of a parenthetical nature the words are often unstressed.’ p. 249.

There is much to learn from the following.

A foolish young fellow once astonished an old clergyman by boasting that he did not believe in anything he could not see and understand.

“Do you believe there is such a country as France ?” inquired the clergyman. “Yes,” said he, “for though I have never seen it, I know others who have.” “Then you refuse to believe in anything that you or others have not seen ?” “Most certainly,” said the youth. “Did you ever see your own brains ?” “Of course not.” “Do you know anybody who has seen them ?” “No.” “Do you think you

have got any?" The young man had to acknowledge himself fairly caught. (Lesson 4)

In the first sentence 'young' is not stressed, while it is in the last. Probably because in the phrase 'a foolish young fellow,' the speaker avoids having too many stresses close together.

"Do you believe.....?" inquired the clergyman.

"Yes," said he.

In these two sentences, 'inquired' and 'said' are unstressed the reason for which is given above.

In the following sentences the stressing of the auxiliary verb 'have' is noticeable.

..... I know others who have.

Do you think you have got any?

Do you know anybody who has seen them?

The second one gives a normal or unemphatic example, but the last one is emphatic. In the first sentence 'have' is at the end and stressed.

Compare the following.

It is fine. How fine it is.

I can go. I can.

IV. Prose Rhythm of The 60th Chapter of Isaiah

"One of the highest points of English prose is probably reached in the Authorised Version of the sixtieth chapter of Isaiah."

HISTORY OF ENGLISH PROSE RHYTHM by G. Saintsbury p. 141

The sixtieth chapter of the Book of Isaiah, a great collection of prophecies, is explained in the following :

- (a) "Rouse thyself, for deliverance is at hand ; be filled with joy, for thou art about to change thy condition ; be cheerful in the light of that knowledge ; discover thyself, or come forth as one breaking forth from a dark night."

THE STUDY BIBLE by M. Poole p. 44

- (b) "The light of deliverance so long waited for is about to shine. This prophecy received its highest fulfilment at the coming of Christ, the true Light of the world, which was followed by a great ingathering of the nations to the Church of God."

A COMMENTARY ON THE HOLY BIBLE p. 450

Look at this example of prose rhythm which Prof. Saintsbury gives, and compare it with mine which follows :

(Prof. Saintsbury's)

× '
 Arise,
 (Lamb)
 (Rising rhythm)

'
 shine ;
 (Monosyllable)
 (Level rhythm)

× × '
 for thy light
 (Anapaest)
 (Rising rhythm)

× '
 is come,
 (Lamb)
 (Rising rhythm)

× × ' ×
 and the glory
 (3rd paeon)
 (Waved rhythm)

× × '
 of the Lord
 (Anapaest)
 (Rising rhythm)

× ' ×
 is risen
 (Amphibrach)
 (Waved rhythm)

× ' ×
 upon thee.
 (Amphibrach)
 (Waved rhythm)

× × '
 For, behold,
 (Anapaest)
 (Rising rhythm)

× ' ×
 the darkness
 (Amphibrach)
 (Waved rhythm)

× ' ×
 shall cover
 (Amphibrach)
 (Waved rhythm)

× '
 the earth,
 (Iamb)
 (Rising rhythm)

x '
 and gross
 (Iamb)
 (Rising rhythm)

' x
 darkness
 (Trochee)
 (Falling rhythm)

x ' x
 the people ;
 (Amphibrach)
 (Waved rhythm)

x x '
 but the Lord
 (Anapaest)
 (Rising rhythm)

x x '
 shall arise
 (Anapaest)
 (Rising rhythm)

x ' x
 upon thee,
 (Amphibrach)
 (Waved rhythm)

x x ' x
 and his glory
 (3rd paeon)
 (Waved rhythm)

x x '
 shall be seen
 (Anapaest)
 (Rising rhythm)

x ' x
 upon thee.
 (Amphibrach)
 (Waved rhythm)

x x ' x
 And the Gentiles
 (3rd paeon)
 (Waved rhythm)

x '
 shall come
 (Iamb)
 (Rising rhythm)

x x '
 to thy light,
 (Anapaest)
 (Rising rhythm)

x '
 and kings
 (Iamb)
 (Rising rhythm)

x x ' x
 to the brightness
 (3rd paeon)
 (Waved rhythm)

x x ' x
 of thy rising.
 (3rd paeon)
 (Waved rhythm)

(Mine)

x '
 Arise,
 (Iamb)
 (Rising rhythm)

'
 shine ;
 (Monosyllable)
 (Level rhythm)

x x '
 for thy light
 (Anapaest)
 (Rising rhythm)

x '
 is come,
 (Iamb)
 (Rising rhythm)

x x ' x
 and the glory
 (3rd paeon)
 (Waved rhythm)

x x '
 of the Lord
 (Anapaest)
 (Rising rhythm)

x ' x x x x
 is risen upon thee.
 (2nd Dochmiac....slur)
 (Waved rhythm)

x x '
 For, behold,
 (Anapaest)
 (Rising rhythm)

x ' x
 the darkness
 (Amphibrach)
 (Waved rhythm)

$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \\ \text{shall cover} \\ (\text{Aphibrach}) \\ (\text{Waved rhythm}) \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \\ \text{the earth,} \\ (\text{Iamb}) \\ (\text{Rising rhythm}) \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \\ \text{and gross} \\ (\text{Iamb}) \\ (\text{Rising rhythm}) \end{array}$
$\begin{array}{c} \times \\ \text{darkness} \\ (\text{Trochee}) \\ (\text{Falling rhythm}) \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \\ \text{the people;} \\ (\text{Amphibrach}) \\ (\text{Waved rhythm}) \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \\ \text{but the Lord} \\ (\text{Anapaest}) \\ (\text{Rising rhythm}) \end{array}$
$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \quad \times \quad \times \\ \text{shall arise upon thee,} \\ (\text{3rd Dochmiac} \dots \text{slur}) \\ (\text{Waved rhythm}) \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \quad \times \\ \text{and his glory} \\ (\text{3rd paeon}) \\ (\text{Waved rhythm}) \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \quad \times \quad \times \\ \text{shall be seen upon thee.} \\ (\text{3rd Dochmiac} \dots \text{slur}) \\ (\text{Waved rhythm}) \end{array}$
$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \quad \times \\ \text{And the Gentiles} \\ (\text{3rd paeon}) \\ (\text{Waved rhythm}) \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \\ \text{shall come} \\ (\text{Iamb}) \\ (\text{Rising rhythm}) \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \quad \times \\ \text{to thy light,} \\ (\text{Anapaest}) \\ (\text{Rising rhythm}) \end{array}$
$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \\ \text{and kings} \\ (\text{Iamb}) \\ (\text{Rising rhythm}) \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \quad \times \\ \text{to the brightness} \\ (\text{3rd paeon}) \\ (\text{Waved rhythm}) \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \times \quad \times \quad \times \\ \text{of thy rising.} \\ (\text{3rd paeon}) \\ (\text{Waved rhythm}) \end{array}$

(Prof. Saintsbury's)

Rising rhythm :.....13

Iamb: Arise, is come, the earth, and gross, shall come,
and kings 6

Anapaest: for thy light, of the Lord, For, behold, but the
Lord, shall arise, shall be seen, to thy light..... 7

Falling rhythm 1

Trochee: darkness 1

Waved rhythm12

Amphibrach: is risen, upon thee, the darkness, shall cover,
the people, upon thee, upon thee 7

3rd paeon: and the glory, and his glory, and the Gentiles, to the brightness, of thy rising.....	5
Level rhythm.....	1
Monosyllable: shine	1

(Mine)

Rising rhythm	1
Iamb: Arise, is come, the earth, and gross, shall come, and kings	6
Anapaest: for thy light, of the Lord, For, behold, but the Lord, to thy light.....	5
Falling rhythm	1
Trochee: darkness	1
Waved rhythm	11
Amphibrach: the darkness, shall cover, the people	3
3rd paeon: and the glory, and his glory, and the Gentiles, to the brightness, of thy rising.....	5
2nd dochmiac by grace-slur: is risen upon thee	1
3rd dochmiac by grace-slur: shall arise upon thee, shall be seen upon thee.....	2
Level rhythm.....	1
Monosyllable: shine	1

Prof. Saintsbury's: $\frac{R(13) \ F(1) \ W(12) \ L(1)}{27}$

Mine: $\frac{R(11) \ F(1) \ W(11) \ L(1)}{24}$

According to Prof. Saintsbury's reading, the passage consists of 27 parts or 'feet;' and mine—24 feet.

The difference lies in this: Prof. Saintsbury treats $\frac{\times \quad \times}{\text{is} \quad \text{risen}}$ and $\frac{\times \quad \times}{\text{shall} \quad \text{arise}}$ upon thee as two feet, (amphibrach and amphibrach), and $\frac{\times \quad \times}{\text{and} \quad \text{upon} \quad \text{thee}}$ as two feet, (anapaest and amphibrach), and $\frac{\times \quad \times}{\text{shall} \quad \text{be}}$

seen and upon thee as two feet, (anapaest and amphibrach). I take
is risen upon thee as one foot, (2nd dochmiac by grace-slur) and shall
arise upon thee and shall be seen upon thee as one each, (3rd
 dochmiac by grace-slur).

Prof. Saintsbury's reading may be said to be dignified; mine, rather colloquial, or modern.

In addition to five feet of anapaest, which puts stress on the third syllable, there are five 3rd paeon, and two 3rd dochmiac by grace-slur, both of which have stress on the 3rd syllable. Accordingly, there are twelve feet in all, out of twenty-four feet, the 3rd syllable of which is stressed:

for thy light and the glory of the Lord
For, behold but the Lord shall arise upon thee...
and his glory shall be seen upon thee And the Gentiles
to thy light to the hrightness of thy rising.

Together with those, six iambic feet and 2nd dochmiac by grace-slur, both of which put the stress on the second syllable, make the passage very rhythmical indeed.

No wonder this passage is very highly spoken of as a model of beautiful excellence.

V. Table of Prose Rhythm

Four Types of Prose Rhythm

Rising rhythm

Iamb		I go; away
Anapaest		devotee; You are kind.
Anti-bacchic		He came back.

4th paeon	x x x '	and he himself
Ionic a minore	x x ' '	with the rich man
5th dochmiac	x x x x ' x	and upon his head
6th dochmiac by grace-slur	x x x x x ' x	
Falling rhythm		
Trochee	' x	actor ; kindness
Dactyl	' x x	register ; educate
Bacchic	' ' x	too kindly
Ist paeon	' x x x	dictionary
Ionic a majore	' ' x x	too sorrowful
Ist dochmiac	' x x x x x	interestedly
Ist dochmiac by grace-slur	' x x x x x x	
Waved rhythm		
Amphibrach	x ' x	to catch him
Cretic	' x ' x	twenty cats
2nd paeon	x ' x x	security
3rd paeon	x x ' x	in the classroom
Antispast	x ' ' x	are too angry
Choriamb	' x x ' x	showing the book
Di-iamb	x ' x ' x	which once in youth
Di-trochee	' x ' x	bending forward
2nd dochmiac	x ' x x x	phonetically
3rd dochmiac	x x ' x x	and appearing there
4th dochmiac	x x x ' x	upon the table
2nd dochmiac by grace-slur	x ' x x x x	is risen upon thee
3rd dochmiac by grace-slur	x x ' x x x	shall arise upon thee
Level rhythm		
Monosyllable	'	man ; God
Spondee	' '	big dogs ; unknown